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THE CRISIS IN DOCTRINAL CHRISTIANITY

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That there exists a widespread indifference and even hostility to ecclesiastical Christianity; that the church is losing its hold upon minds who share most largely the ruling ideas in our modern civilization, are facts admitted by whoever thoughtfully surveys the religious situation today.

One cause (and I am inclined to think the deeper cause) of this really critical situation is the break between modern thought and the doctrines of the church. This situation is the more serious, because the upholders of doctrinal Christianity for the most part do not seem to be aware of the existence of this ever-widening chasm between the age in which we live and the world-view which forms the substructure of the main doctrines of the church. Either the leaders in our Protestant Christianity do not see this break, or they think it can be left to the agencies of time to cover it over, or that it will be safely passed by the compromising expedients of tolerating slight modifications in the form of ancient dogmas, greater freedom in assent to creeds, and larger liberty in interpreting authoritative scriptures. The one fact of momentous import that is not being squarely faced is, that the whole framework of doctrinal Christianity is threatened by modern science and the change in mental attitude that has come with the growing dominion of the scientific method. The substructure of these dogmas is steadily being crumbled by the "waves of unbelieving criticism."

Between modern thought and these doctrines of the church there is an irreconcilable conflict. In respect to these its inherited doctrines the church—Protestant not less than Catholic—is facing a crisis such as it has never faced before; and the church stands before an alternative which permits no middle course.

An examination of the cardinal doctrines which the church still holds will, I think, support my proposition. Let me first instance

the church doctrine of Sacred Scriptures. However much has been conceded to historical criticism and to historical investigation, the essential doctrine of miraculously inspired and authoritative Scriptures is still maintained. This conception of the Scriptures is indispensable to the entire system of doctrine which the church still retains. If by some section of the church the claim to literal and plenary inspiration is no longer made, it is still maintained that the unique character and function of these Scriptures is, that they contain or are a historic record of a revelation of God and his actions in the world which are supernatural and miraculous. It is vital to this doctrine of the Scriptures to hold that they are unique and exceptional, not merely by the circumstance that they contain ethically higher conceptions and purer religious beliefs and sentiments than are found in other scriptures, but that they are unique and differenced from other scriptures by the manner of their formation. It is for this reason that they are held to be of absolute authority for religious belief. Now my position is, that this doctrine of Sacred Scriptures is based upon a conception of the relation of God to the world and to human history which is distinctly opposed by the whole trend of the scientific investigation, the historical criticism, and the deeper philosophical thinking of our time. The supernaturalism which this conception of revelation and Scriptures involves has no place in the world-view of the twentieth century. At this point, there is between the doctrine of the church and the scientific and philosophic thought of our time an irreconcilable disharmony.

The same fundamental antagonism appears when we examine the doctrine of man's sinfulness. The church doctrine still is, that this moral state of man, universal in its extent, is due to a lapse from a state of original righteousness; and this present status has been brought about, not merely by each individual's own conduct, but by what has come to every son of Adam through the operation of a divine method of moral government. This status of every individual member of the race can be changed only by an operation of divine grace, supernatural in its method, and wholly distinct from anything which man can do for himself. It is obvious that this ancient doctrine is based upon conceptions of God, of the

nature and of the spiritual history of man, that go squarely counter to those conceptions of the world and those ethical standards which rule our modern civilization.

Still more undeniable is the break between the church doctrine of Redemption and the dominant ideas of the twentieth century. This doctrine contains the following things: (1) It teaches that this redemption is effected by the mediation of a historic person who unites in himself, in a manner wholly transcending our comprehension, the essential natures of God and man. The person of man's Redeemer is the God-man. This union of God and man in a metaphysical sense is vital to this doctrine of human salvation. (2) Inseparable from this moment in the doctrine of Redemption is the second moment, the Incarnation as an event supernatural and miraculous, if we accept the story of Jesus' birth as historical; at all events, this assumption of human nature by the Logos' personality, and the formation in time of the God-man-personality of the Redeemer is the basal conception on which rests the church doctrine of Redemption and the new spiritual life in men. The Christ of theology is a Person who does not admit of historical explanation or comprehension. (3) The third constituent in the doctrine of Redemption is the Atonement, made by the vicarious sufferings and death of Jesus the Christ. The substance of this doctrine, after deducting all modifications it has undergone, is, that the sufferings and death of the cross were necessary to the removing of an obstacle to the forgiveness of man's sin which existed in the character of God as righteous. The satisfaction of divine justice made necessary just these experiences of the sinless Son of God. The doctrine teaches that, in consequence of that death on the cross, the status of the race as respects divine forgiveness is changed; man is put on a new objective footing; God is disposed toward him, and able to act toward him in a manner different from that in which he could otherwise act.

Now, it should be clear that this central dogma of the church rests upon presuppositions which the principles of historical criticism, philosophical thinking, and the ethical conceptions of our age distinctly reject. If the principles of modern historical criticism are sound, the story of that birth in Bethlehem is not

history. If the dominant philosophy of today is to be held, the Supernaturalism involved in this doctrine is impossible; and if our present ethical conceptions are not to be abandoned, God has not dealt with us men after the manner set forth in this doctrine.

To conclude our examination, we will take the doctrine of Future Punishment. The destiny of those who come under the operation of the retributive justice of God, is one which the reason and conscience of today cannot reconcile with the character of any God whose existence can be rationally believed. To ask men to believe in such a moral ruler of the universe is an insult to reason and an affront to the intelligent conscience of our age.

The thesis I have been maintaining is that the underlying conceptions of doctrinal Christianity are at war with those conceptions of the world of human history and the moral order which have become established in the minds of thinking men today. This, it seems to me, is the crisis which the theology of the church faces today. Is the church really awake to this situation? One is moved to ask this question in view of the easy-going and apparently unconcerned state of mind that characterizes most of the members of our so-called orthodox churches today. The same old doctrines are held apparently with no suspicion of the fundamental discord between them and those ideas—scientific, historical, and philosophical—which the same believer in doctrine may be holding at the same time. But, however it may be with those who are within the church, this break between the age and the theology of the church does not escape the notice of the truly religious but thoughtful men whom the doctrines of the church bar from her communion. To these minds the alternative which is presented to ecclesiastical Christianity is clear and uncompromising. Two ways, and two ways only, lie open. The church must either reaffirm her dogmas, and put herself against the current of modern thought which threatens to undermine and destroy them, or she must let her dogmas go, as outgrown shells—earthen vessels that can no longer hold that divine treasure men have sought to keep within them.

I have said a third alternative is not possible, and yet a *via media* is really being tried, though those who are taking it are for the most part quite unaware of what they are trying to do. There are others

who are in a way conscious of what they are about, and who appear honestly to think that a man who accepts the modern world-view in all its aspects can sincerely confess his religious faith in the same doctrinal creeds which are based upon a world-view that has passed away. These men say that these historic doctrines may properly be so interpreted as to leave nothing which a man who fully accepts the science and culture of our age cannot accept. It is maintained that, following the analogy of the interpretation put upon legal statutes, or the letter of our constitution, a broad enough construction can be given these similar documents which will bring them into working agreement with the knowledge, the thought, and the ideals of our age. The reasoning by which this constructive program, as it may be called, is advocated is specious; but a little examination suffices to show that it proceeds upon a false analogy, and affords evidence that those who think to meet the present crisis by this expedient fail to understand the true character of the break between these doctrines and modern thought. The doctrines of the church are, unfortunately for this reasoning, unlike legal statutes of the past and our federal constitution in just those points which are essential to this reasoning from analogy. These doctrines are conceptions of the world-reality, quite definite in their terms; they set forth certain alleged facts and real processes, assumed to have gone on, or to be actually going on, in the real world, in that these dogmas embody certain well-defined and accurately stated metaphysical ideas. It has never been a question what these dogmas mean; the sole question about them has always been, Are they true? To propose an interpretation of any one of these doctrines which will make it harmonize with the modern world-view is to propose something as contradictory and stultifying as would be the proposal to interpret our federal constitution so as to make it harmonize with the conception of government on which the German empire is based. Stripped of the plausible expressions in which this scheme for saving the ancient dogmas is clothed, it amounts to this: Let the church continue to hold its dogmas in the "form of sound words," while it permits the denial of their substance. We are taught that "men do not put new wine into old bottles but into new bottles"; but these advocates of a *via*

media have apparently discovered a way of making old bottles hold new wine, or of making old bottles hold both new and old wine.

The more clear-sighted minds within the church see the impossibility of so interpreting the doctrines of the church as to make them harmonize with the ruling ideas of our age. Not less clear is the recognition of this impossibility by those men who find their admission to membership in the church barred by those doctrines which their intelligent consciences will not allow them to accept. To propose to these men a subscription to the creeds on the terms which the advocates of this *via media* suggest, only provokes from them a response that carries contempt for those who can so misunderstand, or so slightly regard the doctrines they profess to believe. No, while these doctrines remain, thousands of men whom, we believe, Jesus would have recognized as his followers will feel themselves excluded from the church which bears his name; and so long as these dogmas hold their present position, the great body of consistent believers in them will not extend the hand of Christian fellowship to those who cannot join them in the same doctrinal confession. These considerations lead me to conclude there can be no *via media* in the solution of this grave problem that confronts doctrinal Christianity.

Think as we may concerning the course taken by the Vatican in the matter of the modernist movement, one thing must be admitted, i.e., that the head of the Catholic church has rightly appreciated the critical character of the present situation. He reads correctly the meaning, and rightly discerns the outcome of the current of modern thought as it will affect the very foundation on which Roman Catholicism rests. The Pope is to be credited with seeing what the leaders of Protestant Christianity apparently do not see, viz., that the acceptance of modern ideas carries with it the disintegration of the entire doctrinal structure of the Protestant churches no less than of the Catholic church. The upholders of the Protestant doctrinal Christianity, did they see it, have a common cause with the head of the Catholic church in his present struggle against modernism. They have the same thing at stake; the same waves of unbelieving criticism that are shaking the foundation

stones of the Catholic church are threatening also the Protestant doctrines.

However ineffectual his attempt may prove to be, no one can help admiring the courage, the high faith, of the Roman pontiff in making this open warfare against the enlightenment, the science, and the culture of his age. This action of the Pope is consistent with the presuppositions on which both Catholic and Protestant doctrines are based. If the church is effectually to maintain her doctrines, she must openly challenge the whole spirit of the modern age; she must dispute the claims of science; she must reject the principles of historical criticism and the regulative principles of historical explanation of man's spiritual life; she must see in the reigning doctrine of evolution a deadly foe to her vital dogmas. If we rightly read the signs of the times, we Protestants cannot look on with unconcern, while Pius X is fighting for the existence of the Catholic system. He is fighting at the same time for the existence of the doctrinal system of Protestant Christianity. Do we flatter ourselves that the Catholic church can fall in ruins and that our Protestant dogmas will escape the same doom? Do we think the claims to authority can successfully be denied to the head of the Roman church, and the same denial not be extended to those claims to authoritative revelation on which Protestant doctrines are based? It is the claim to a supra-rational and authoritative source of religious knowledge that is at stake; and it matters little where the seat of this authority is placed, whether in the Pope, in scriptures, or in a body of interpreters of these scriptures, the main issue is the same.

In his struggle against modernism Pius X is fighting for the maintenance of the historic doctrines of the church and the world-view on which they are based, against the intellectual forces and the prevalent temper of the modern world. The issue the Pope has raised is clearly drawn and admits of no compromise. The leaders of the modernist movement doubtless think this movement will rest when it has swept away only some superstitions and unfounded beliefs and claims to authority, and secured to reason a larger freedom in matters of faith; but the Pope and his advisers see more clearly the true character of this movement and the actual

forces which are behind it; they are far more logical and far-sighted and are better discerners of spirits than are the modernists who, for the most part, lack clearness of vision and consistency in thinking. The Pope is not mistaken in his judgment, that the impelling ideas of this movement spring from an age that is essentially hostile to what is vital to the Catholic system. These ideas are disintegrative of the structure of that church "whose foundation stones are a deposit of doctrine" which can have but one authoritative interpretation.

But the same disintegrative forces are at work in Protestant Christianity, only here—thanks to the absence of a central authority and of an alert and watchful custodian of these inherited doctrines—this work goes on with only here and there a suspicion of its character and outcome. Let no one imagine, however, that Protestant dogmas are not really endangered because, yielding to the current of modern thought, those who still teach and who still profess to believe these doctrines are being steadily carried away from them. Thanks to our careless thinking, to our elastic consciences, we still profess to believe these doctrines while pulpit and pew for the most part give themselves no further concern: we are simply drifting with the current, apparently careless of whither it is bearing us. The leaders of the Catholic church, on the other hand, do see whither this current is moving. They are trying to stem it; and they are measuring its force. Thoughtful and observant men outside of the church see this movement of things; and these men cannot understand our state of mind: our orthodoxy in dogmas, our toleration in interpretation, our acceptance of modern science and ways of thinking, and our retention of these historic dogmas. These men can hardly be blamed for suspecting our sincerity in subscribing to both creeds at the same time. They find it hard to believe that we really understand either the doctrines of science or the doctrines of the church, if we honestly believe them to be in harmony. The time was, when a Leibniz or a Locke could reconcile the doctrines of theology with science and philosophy; but that age has passed. Such compromise schemes seem to the critical mind of today as unsubstantial as the child's house of card-boards. It is no longer possible, in the way proposed by these

reconcilers of faith and reason, to render to Reason the things that are Reason's, and to Faith the things that are Faith's.

I think the only alternative open to Protestant Christianity is either to maintain her doctrines in their original purity, with a distinct consciousness of the chasm that separates them from the doctrines of science and the main current of twentieth-century thinking; or she must cease to insist upon the acceptance of these dogmas as the test of Christian faith and the basis of Christian fellowship. She must dare to say, as does the Catholic church, human thinking is wrong if it opposes the doctrines which rest upon divine revelation, or she must frankly admit that these doctrines cannot claim to be true. That there is a fundamental disagreement between the thoughts of men that have broadened and become quite other than they were centuries ago, and these doctrines, is, I think, indisputable.

The time is ripe for the decisive step I have indicated. The very life of the religion of Jesus demands it. Unless this dissociation of Christianity from these ancient doctrines is made, the world will leave both behind. The educated classes in ever-increasing ratio are falling away from the church; and whither the educated mind tends in these matters, thither the masses will in the end follow. If Christianity ceases to command the respect and the support of the men who shape the thinking and the great moral and social movements of the world, only a perpetual miracle can save the church from extinction. The dissolution of the bond which has for centuries held the religion of the spirit in bondage to the letter of human dogmas will not be effected without protest and struggle. To separate Christian faith from these theological doctrines will seem to many the destruction of faith itself. The strength of mental associations of so long standing, mental inertia, that resists any change and makes it unwelcome and difficult, the fear of those who, in despair of anything better, cling to doctrines they do not really believe—all this stands in the way of the course I have suggested. But, on the other hand, there has never been a time that was more propitious to this undertaking. To recover original Christianity, to know what was the religion of Jesus, and what is the substance of Christian faith, is a task quite within the

limits of successful inquiry. Whoever will follow the path opened by historical investigation into the beginnings of Christianity, into the sources of our knowledge of Jesus, his teaching, and the purpose of his life, will not find it difficult to see a clear distinction between the religion of Jesus and the theology of the church. On the basis of a consensus of historical judgment, it can safely be affirmed that the teaching of Jesus gives no authoritative support to those dogmas of the church over which there has been so much un-Christian warfare, and which are the reason for so much opposition to the church today.

The entire system of church doctrines rests upon a view of the origin of Christianity which is unhistorical. The Jesus of history is not the Christ who has been made the founder of ecclesiastical Christianity. Once let this fact find its due recognition; once recognize the fact that all theology is man's metaphysics of man's religious experience; that Christian theology began with Paul and the first preachers of Christianity; and it will be admitted that we of this latest Christian century are as free to interpret Jesus as were Paul and his contemporaries and the great builders of theological doctrines in the following centuries. To us, as to them, is committed the same divine treasure; this treasure is no deposit of doctrine to be kept unchanged, but a life of moral unity with God awakened in man by the ministry of Jesus. The theologies that have been constructed from Paul to Calvin and Luther are but earthen vessels in which men have held this divine treasure. These vessels have been shaped by the needs and the conditions of culture that existed in the centuries in which they were formed; we of this century, if we are to keep the real faith of Christianity, must create for *our* age forms in which its living principle can find fitting and effective expression.